

Recidivism: Towards A Solution

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, (early 1989), the do-gooders of the Howard League For Penal Reform and company have again been voicing their concern about the numbers of people in prison. Such trite comments as 'parole should be mandatory', i.e. prisoners should serve only one third of their sentences; and 'there are far too many people in prison', are once again being flung at us. A few years ago, commenting on the numbers of women serving time, (about 3% that of male offenders), one of these poor, misguided bogs actually commented: 'Women should never be sent to prison unless it is absolutely necessary.' There have even been calls for judges to be sacked when they have dared to impose custodial sentences on women who have taken human life. Often in these cases the victim, (usually a husband or live-in lover), is made out to be the Devil incarnate, and it is probably fortunate he is dead, because if he weren't he would be crucified by the press anyway.

From the sublime to the ridiculous, at the other end of the scale we have the Honourable Geoffrey Dickens. No stranger to tabloid sensationalism, Mr Dickens has been quoted publicly as making such utterances as 'They (criminals), should be thrown into prison and left to rot.' Mr Dickens arguments have so little credibility they do not warrant further consideration. Returning to the Howard League's comments though, we should certainly give these our attention. But before going any further I should mention that I have first hand knowledge of the penal system from the wrong side of the bars, so this essay is rooted firmly in practice, and not some wishy-washy abstract of social science.

PRIORITIES

The first priority of the prison system must be to

protect the public from dangerous men. Having, (rightly or wrongly) abolished the death penalty, there is at present no other course of action open to society than to lock up certain offenders, in many cases forever. These include serial sex killers, multiple rapists, arsonists and others whose behaviour is likely to make them a menace to society as long as they are physically capable of mischief. It includes also people who have committed crimes so heinous that society can never forgive them, however reformed and repentant they become. We need not concern ourselves with these here. Next there are those who, while not psychopaths or sex fiends must rightly be considered dangerous. This category includes drug dealers large and small, armed robbers and people who, while they have proved themselves to be violent, fall short of committing actual murder.

The problem with this group is, as far as this writer can see, how far and for how long they can be considered dangerous. If a man is convicted of selling cocaine and is sent to prison for five years are we to assume that he will become innocuous the moment he is released? Of course not! Or a man who receives a similar sentence for a robbery with violence. Are we to suppose that it will be safe to let him walk the streets after he has served his stretch? Likewise not. The real point of handing out any sort of custodial sentence is not to cure the dangerous, violent or anti-social tendencies of the offender, rather it is to deter both him and others who might be thinking of doing something similar. So that the next time he is tempted to stick a knife in someone who has spilled his beer he will think twice. Next time he is tempted to make a quick profit terrifying an old lady in a dark alley he will weigh up the probable punishment against the potential reward and decide there are less riskier ways of making money.

This brings us to non-violent offenders, who, many prison reformers seem to think are not dangerous and therefore need not be locked up. This is patently absurd. Burglary is usually a non-violent crime, although if a burglar is disturbed he may panic and become

violent, even to the extent of committing murder. But to classify burglary per se as non-violent and therefore non-dangerous is to miss the point. Much of the damage done by burglary, and other crimes, is psychological. I didn't realise how great are the psychological effects on the victims of crime myself until a couple of years ago when I was mugged, not three hundred yards from my own front door. Whilst I put up a spirited defence, was not robbed, and suffered nothing more serious than a bruised knee, I did come within a whisker of being cut. Had it not been for a neighbour shouting out of his window it is possible I might not be here today.

The immediate effect of this was that I became temporarily paranoid. I was waylaid by three youths: two black and one white, although only the black youths actually attacked me. For several weeks after that incident everywhere I went I would see three youths: two black and one white, and think to myself: Was it them? I would stare at them and they of course, would stare back at me. When eventually this paranoia wore off I was still extremely wary of walking out late at night. To this day I am forever looking over my shoulder, and have become extremely suspicious of strangers. For women, and even for slighter built men than myself the problem is, of course, far worse.

By the same token, although a burglary may involve no contact with an intruder, the fear of assault, rape, murder is still there. Probably this fear is worst of all in old people, and often does irreparable harm. Even to a great clod like myself.

If one adds to this the damage, inconvenience and sometimes heartache caused by a burglary; the theft of an irreplaceable possession perhaps, and the fact that some burglars may have twenty, fifty or even a hundred offences taken into consideration, it is difficult to argue against some sort of custodial sentence.

One argument often put forward here is that prison are breeding grounds for crime. A young joy rider who does a six month stretch for TDA is likely to come out

undeterred from stealing cars, but well clued as to how to burgle a chemist's or fence a stolen credit card. There may be some truth in this; prisoners do talk shop, but there is no hard evidence that recidivism begins in Wormwood Scrubs. For most cons, their real problems start, not the moment they enter prison, but the day they leave the system. We shall return to this presently.

ALTERNATIVES TO CUSTODY

Apart from the custodial sentence there are several others the court may impose; the main ones are: suspended sentence, fine, community service and probation order. Let us deal first with the fine.

A fine imposed for an offence of dishonesty on a member of the 'criminal element' is just about the worst kind of sentence imaginable. Many years ago, when I was living in a bail hostel in the North of England, I was told the following amusing anecdote by a hardened burglar. It speaks reams for the stupidity of this method of dealing with this problem.

Barry was a welder, not a poorly paid job, but although he could earn a fair honest living, he had a penchant for stealing other people's property in the dead of night. While working for a particular firm he broke into the premises after work and robbed the safe. He was arrested almost at once and, despite his appalling record, instead of sending him down, the magistrates fined him heavily and ordered him to repay the money he had stolen plus costs. "So I screwed the firm next door to pay back my firm." were his approximate words.

Bearing in mind that the criminal element, as opposed to 'professional' criminals are mostly people of low intelligence and little or no academic qualifications, most of them, if they are able to find full time work are to be found in the most menial and low

paid of jobs. Fines imposed on them do one or both of two things: cause genuine hardship; encourage them to commit further offences.

The suspended sentence. This may be of some use as a deterrent to a persistent offender. Many judges impose suspended sentences for offences which are unlikely to be repeated. Even women who have smothered their babies while suffering from post natal depression have received a 'bender'. Surely there is no point to this? Only where an offence is likely to be repeated, and a relatively trivial one at that, does a suspended sentence serve any purpose. Even so, it is remarkable how many people blot their copy book again before the sentence has run out.

Probation. Is a joke. As a sentence it is no sentence at all, although it does sometimes allow people who have genuine problems, eg drink, drugs, to be given a helping hand, professional guidance or even a place to live while an attempt is made to put some order into their lives and combat their addictions or other shortcomings. While the idea of probation AS A SENTENCE is a joke, the concept itself is undoubtably a good one. My own experience of probation officers is generally rather favourable.

Community service. Really suitable only for very trivial offences. A lot of people have extracted the urine over CS since it was introduced. But even many of its most outspoken critics have admitted that it does work.

THE CRIMINAL ELEMENT - THE REAL PROBLEM

This study is not intended to be in any way auto-biographical, but I can truthfully state that many of the problems I have faced over the last four years are typical of those faced by the criminal element, although

I am hardly a typical member of this fraternity. Therefore I make no excuses for drawing on my own experience.

I served a three year stretch for a quite serious offence which resulted from an addiction, one which, hopefully, I have now cured for good. This is not proffered as an excuse, but as a reason. On my discharge I was, (or would have been) homeless, but was, thanks to a concerned probation officer, given a place at a rehabilitation hostel. I was sent to see my new probation officer and to sign on unemployed. While I lived at the hostel I signed on personal issue. Every Thursday when I collected my giro cheque I had to queue up with all the other personal issue claimants. Most of them could rightly be described as the underclass, (some would say the dregs) of society. All were either homeless, living in bed and breakfast, squats etc or had addresses which were regarded as unsafe for the purpose of posting out giros. Many had tattoos, (not just the men); effing and blinding was the rule rather than the exception, including at women staff, and most were to some degree unemployable. Some had not worked for years, (officially). A high percentage were smokers, not just of tobacco, and many were also regular participants in minor criminal activity. Some would turn up to sign on the worse for drink.

These, like those in prison, are the people Geoffrey Dickens would willingly leave to rot. At first glance it is easy to agree with him, but before doing so one should ask: What have these people got? What have they ever had? What chance do they have now?

Although I believe in free will there seems to me to be something cruelly deterministic about certain classes of people. A man who has been to university, read some philosophy and has the brains to consider the issues can be said truly to have free will. Especially if he comes from a stable background. But what of the underclass? For people of low intelligence and little character there is so much less free will. Many, indeed most of the criminal element, both at the dole office and in Wormwood Scrubs, Brixton et al have had a somewhat limited choice of action all of their lives. To start with, most of them don't come from the right back-

ground. Their lack of academic qualifications means they have only ever been able to take either menial job for low pay or extremely physically demanding jobs. Not much of a choice. In the case of the latter, what little money they earned, surplus, would not be saved but smoked, drunk or gambled away. Few of these people have ever been abroad, many of them have never even had a proper holiday. They have no culture, their leisure is wasteful, their lives not so much shallow as one dimensional. When they become involved in crime and pick up their first conviction(s) they become enveloped in a vicious circle.

ONE MAN'S EXPERIENCE

Like most people I didn't realise this until it happened to me. Having greater aspirations, (principally in the field of music), I was not interested in finding a job except as a means to an end. To embark on a career at my age and with my antecedents would have required a degree of commitment and self-sacrifice I was not prepared to give, at least not for the privilege of working for someone else. That being so, I still needed to obtain sufficient funds both to replace my jaded wardrobe and to finance my forays into the music field, so I decided to take a job. That was the theory; in practice things turned out very differently.

Although the house I lived in was classified as a hostel by the DHSS and part funded by the Home Office it was split up into separate bedsits. There were shared rooms, but I was fortunate in the sixteen months or so that I lived there not to have to share. The hostel was entirely self-catering with an excellent kitchen, refrigerators, deep freeze, communal lounge, games room, well heated and with a plentiful supply of hot water. Because of DHSS rules the benefit residents received consisted of some thirty pounds per week rent plus forty-two pounds living expenses. Later, living expenses were reduced to forty pounds per week. It took me a while to realise just how generous this was (in

comparison with non-boarder, ie householder rates for unemployment and social security benefits), In addition to this, under DHSS rules residents were allowed to earn up to four pounds per week without loss of benefit. Anything over four pounds was deducted from benefit. Also, in this particular hostel, residents who found full time work were charged five pounds per week less rent.

Having in the past always had reasonably well paid jobs, (for an unskilled person), including shift allowances and overtime, it came as a rude awakening to find that any job I took would leave me financially little or no better off than non-working residents. When I had moved to the North of England several years before I had experienced the same problem for a while, but had eventually succeeded in finding first a well paid night job, then a relatively well paid job with prospects of sorts which involved shift work. This being so I was not greatly perturbed initially. I realised that finding a job with a reasonable income involved a lot more than visiting the local job centre once a week. Now though, all the doors that had once been open to me had closed, so I had to look further afield.

Through the hostel I was put in touch with two agencies which specialised in finding jobs for ex-offenders. Neither of them came up with anything worthwhile, and for a long time I became depressed. Fortunately I did not waste the time and concentrated on getting fit and developing my other talents as best I could. It is easy to see though that both here and at every stage further on, someone with less self-motivation than myself could, and probably would have given up in frustration and sought an easy way out through reversion to criminal behaviour.

The big break for me was that I became involved not in 'the underworld' but in the black economy. I discovered a medium through which, over the next two years I obtained a number of cash in hand jobs. I found also, (I will call it) an agency whereby I found similar work. Over a period of eighteen months, two years or so

I did a number of menial jobs including washing dishes delivering sandwiches and painting and decorating. Because of the low pay and the absurd rules over means tested benefits none of these jobs would have been acceptable 'on the cards'. At the time I was earning sixty pounds a week for a thirty hour stint, a fellow resident remarked to me bitterly: "I don't know how you get away with it ----" referring to my absence from the weekly residents' meetings and the managements turning a blind eye to my unofficial income. I might have pointed out that even when this was added to my benefit I was still a lot worse off than the average blue collar worker, according to government statistics. Certainly for a single man living alone.

When eventually I left the hostel I was allocated a housing association flat. It was only then that I realised how lucky I was that I had not worked officially during my stay there and had no savings. The flat I was allocated was not far from the hostel. It was two rooms, self-contained: kitchen, bedroom/living room and bathroom/toilet. If I had worked officially during the previous twelve months, even if I had taken a temporary job, I would not have been eligible for any financial assistance from the DHSS. Like wise, if I had declared savings of over five hundred pounds I would have drawn the short straw and been eligible for only a reduced amount. As it turned out I did receive not only a grant, but a full and quite generous one. But I was a child in time, just how much so I was soon to realise.

I had been allocated the flat just before the Tory government decided to 'reform' the system of DHSS grants and single payments. Had I applied a month or even a week later I have no doubt I would have missed the boat. (I was quite possibly the last person in the country to receive a grant under the old system). As it was, I was sent along to the Social Security office where I was told to make out a list of the things I needed, obtain estimates for them up to a limit, then

submit these to the office; which I did promptly. I was then told I would get what I had applied for. As already mentioned I did get everything I applied for. The cost of furnishing my flat came to over six hundred pounds, excluding my own expenditure, but it was just as well that I contacted the office almost daily until the grant cheques came through. I was told variously that my grant application was being processed; that it will be the next one to be dealt with; that it's second from the top of the pile..... Even so I had to wait nearly three weeks, and would have had to sleep on bare boards if I hadn't been put up for the duration by a lady friend; who, just for the record, was over seventy.

It took me a while to get the flat sorted out, and for a few weeks I received a very pleasant bonus, one which was totally unexpected. In the transition from boarders' rates to single householder rates the DHSS had forgotten to inform the UBO that my claim was to be reassessed. As a result of this I continued to be paid the old rate in addition to having my rent paid by the housing benefit office. Needless to say they soon realised what they had done, but the extra certainly came in handy.

After I had put some sort of order into the flat and grown accustomed to it, I went back to the black economy: washing dishes mostly. I wondered how long I could go on like this. Fortunately, at the end of May 1987 I read an advertisement in a local publication which revealed an entirely new aspect of the black economy to me. For obvious reasons I will not go into details about it here. Suffice it to say that although I have hated every minute of it, and for long periods the rewards have been minuscule, I have, at times, done quite well, even exceptionally well out of it, especially at a certain time of year. Although even then I could never have made a living out of it. To say the black economy has saved my life is probably no exaggeration. All the same, it is something I have long

grown tired of. I have incurred one further conviction on account of it and received a heavy fine, (one which I have no intention of paying), and I have at times had hassle off the UBO over it. Even with my irregular unde-the counter income it was nearly eighteen months before I could afford to get a telephone put in, but at least I have managed to save some money for a rainy day. When I was discharged from prison early in 1985 I had barely a hundred pounds to my name, plus a discharge grant. Today I have quite a lot more. All the same I have very little to show for thirty plus years on this Earth and cannot afford a holiday, a decent standard of living or any meaningful social life. So far I have resisted all attempts by the ET brigade to force me to take either a 'job' or 'employment training', but the future still looks black. For reasons I will not go into, I am going to have to abandon my particular niche in the black economy very soon, and there are no other opportunities on the horizon. Yes, the future looks black indeed for me, although having got this far I am sure I will survive somehow. But if it looks black for me, there is a myriad others for whom it holds out no hope at all. At this point, having built up a picture of life on the bottom rung from my own experience, I would like to turn again to the very bottom of the ladder.

THE- NOT-SO-LUCKY-ONES

I find it difficult to think of myself either as lucky or privileged, but that indeed is what I am in comparison to many others. Many if not most people discharged from prison do have an address, but many do not. I can recall one instance, about 1979, when a youth, (with whom I was well acquainted), was discharged from Borstal and given a room in a dosshouse where he had to share a room with a seventy year old asthmatic who wet the bed. He was barely nineteen at the time.

Others are given a discharge grant, a travel warrant and a list of hostels. Anyone who has had to live in a hostel for any period will be well acquainted with the reality of hostel life and the stigma attached to it. This latter is both social and, perhaps more importantly, economic. The fact that many residents have different problems is a case of variety taking the spice out of life. The biggest problems are drinking, drug taking and gambling, not necessarily in that order, but alcohol abuse is probably still far and away the main problem at this level of society.

In addition to those of homelessness and unsuitable accommodation, the other main problems suffered by former prisoners are probably DHSS legislation and the poverty trap.

With the 'reforms' of the system and the abolition of practically all grants, those who don't have families to go back to are most likely to end up in unsuitable hostels or third rate furnished accommodation. (This latter includes the now notorious bed and breakfast). Then there is the poverty trap which amounts to a choice between low pay and no pay. Although this, like poor accommodation, is not confined to the criminal element, it is certainly one which hits them harder than most, simply by virtue of qualification, ie lack of skills, poor work record and, of course, unsuitability on account of antecedents. Some do overcome this problem to a degree by venturing into the black economy. In fact, probably the overwhelming majority of the long term unemployed, (criminal and non-criminal classes alike), do find occasional cash in hand jobs, everything from washing dishes to busking. Most of this is of an ad hoc or opportunist nature; very few enjoy a regular income supplement from the black economy because it isn't that easy; I speak from bitter experience. Indeed, if I had lived in the provinces rather than conveniently situated in the capital, my excursions into the black economy would almost certainly never have happened because the same opportunities simply do not exist

there. In any case, the whole set up is totally wrong because it criminalises what would otherwise be considered socially desirable behaviour.

TOWARDS A SOLUTION

I have not touched on the prison system very much here because although I believe it can be improved, I do not believe there is something radically wrong with the system; it is simply not that bad. Nor do I believe that non-violent offenders should never be locked up. Of course they should! The prisons are not quite the breeding ground of vice or finishing schools for criminals many reformers would have us believe. The fact is that very few prisoners cause any real problems or suffer hardships in prison. Their problems begin the day they get out. As I have pointed out, I am not concerned here with professional criminals, nor with the street brawler nor with the bank clerk who is caught with his hand in the till. The person we are focusing on here is the recidivist; the member of the criminal element who, as one reformer put it, enters a cycle of petty crime, prison, more petty crime, more prison, and ends up doing a life sentence on the instalment plan.

SUITABLE ACCOMMODATION

The first priority should be that every prisoner on his discharge is given a suitable address. Those who have families or their own flats etc should require minimal help, although there are instances, often with younger offenders, when it may not be desirable that the person in question returns to live permanently with his family.

The solution to the accommodation problem is for central government to make available to local after care

services sufficient funds to either rent or purchase quality furnished accommodation in certain areas, preferably self-contained bedsits and two or three room flats. Certain individuals might prefer to share, either with someone in a similar position or with a girlfriend/friend or even someone who has been living in hostel accommodation. The importance of adequate self-contained accommodation can hardly be overstressed. It is a territorial imperative. Not only does it give those concerned a place of their own and a sense of security, it also goes some way towards keeping them off the streets. Many hostel dwellers have no choice but to sit around all day with other residents, and maybe getting into bad company and habits. Or else they are kicked out onto the streets and spend the day walking around aimlessly, (or perhaps purposefully), with no money in their pockets and again often in bad company. This is a sure fire recipe for trouble.

THE ECONOMIC PROBLEM

The economic problems faced by recidivists are caused by their inability to earn a reasonable living. As mentioned earlier, there are reasons for this. One is that a criminal record is obviously just about the worst reference any potential employee can proffer. Many jobs are automatically closed to anyone who has a conviction for even a trivial offence, and rightly so. Having served a prison sentence is an even bigger stigma, and a three or four time loser has proved himself to be untrustworthy in the extreme. When one adds to this the problems of lack of skills, low intelligence, bad temperament, tattoos, and even an unwillingness or inability to wear clean clothes or use soap and water, it should be recognised that many such people have NO chance of earning even a subsistence income other than by living off their wits. The solution here is not to hound them into accepting places on government 'retraining schemes' when many of them haven't

the intelligence to open a can of sardines; nor to snoop on them hoping to catch them clearing glasses in a pub so that this may be deducted from their benefit. The solution is to pay them a guaranteed non-means tested income on condition that they refrain from criminal activity. The payment should be made direct into a building society account, which might encourage some of them to save money. This income would serve two purposes: a) it would enable them to live, if not in luxury, then in reasonable comfort. b) it would lift them out of the poverty trap so that they could take menial or part time jobs and enjoy the fruits of their labours. 8(see footnote).

This idea will, I am sure, be regarded as highly controversial: morally wrong, and unfair to the law abiding community. However, like the controversial subject of issuing clean needles to drug addicts, the issue is not really one of morals, but of efficacy. In the latter case, if issuing needles helps restrict the spread of AIDS, then clearly it is justified. Likewise, if giving these wretched people a handout keeps them out of other people's pockets, out of court and out of prison, then it too is justified.

HOW WOULD THE SCHEME WORK?

Very simply. In essence, after a man had been convicted of a certain number of offences of a certain magnitude, and if he satisfied certain conditions ie if an assessment board considered him to be a suitable subject, he would, on discharge from prison, be given the opportunity of registering as a participant. The scheme would be entirely voluntary, but it is doubtful if many qualifiers would refuse to participate.

On his discharge, the subject would a) have to agree to live at a specific address and not change his address without giving advance notice to and receiving approval from his probation officer or local administration officer. b) sign an agreement not to engage in

any criminal activity while on the scheme. c) agree to meet at regular intervals with an appointed liaison officer to discuss any problems arising from it or from any personal circumstances.

Other conditions could be tailored to suit individual needs, eg attendance at an alcohol rehabilitation centre, attending adult literacy classes etc. The scheme would have to be entirely voluntary.

HOW WOULD CONDITIONS BE ENFORCED?

Anyone changing his address without permission or failing to attend conditional rehabilitation therapy without good reason would have his income stopped. Anyone committing any criminal offence would be similarly penalised. Anyone sent to prison while on the scheme would be disqualified and would not be given a second chance.

Before going on the scheme the advantages of staying out of trouble should be explained clearly to the participant. That he would be guaranteed a basic income either for life or for a set period of years. He could be rewarded, at first with a monthly, then quarterly, then finally an annual bonus for keeping his nose clean. A bonus could also be paid to those who managed to secure full time employment or who accepted voluntary work.

HOW MUCH WOULD THE INCOME BE?

The guaranteed income would have to be above the current level of unemployment benefit/income support. The exact rate would have to be decided at the time and would not necessarily be uniform throughout the country. Probably income paid at the standard rate of invalidity/long term benefit would be sufficient; or perhaps slightly above. Rent, rates and water rates would also have to be paid. Once the scheme got off

the ground, it should be possible to solve the rent problem by building/acquiring premises specifically for the purpose. There is even the alluring possibility that quite large numbers of recidivists, (mostly single men), could be set up in small self-contained communities located conveniently away from cities and main towns. In fact, there is no reason why systems of apartments and chalets similar to a holiday centre should not be built. They could have their own shops, communal facilities eg gym, games centre, and be staffed by a small contingent of non-uniformed professionals and volunteers, both from without and within the community. There could also be a social worker in residence to deal with personal problems. The community would have no formal structure and would in no sense of the word be an institution, although there is no reason why a committee should not be set up to run it and to encourage all residents to participate.

WHO PAYS THE BILL?

If all this sounds like pie in sky, it should be born in mind that open prisons are often run on similar lines, though there is of course more discipline and more rules. As to the expense of setting up such a scheme, either initially just paying people to keep out of trouble or, later on, setting up a community, the starting up expense would indeed be considerable. But the running expenses would not be that great when savings from other quarters are taken into account. The cost of keeping people in prison is horrendous, and the cost of crime, in purely financial terms, is astronomical. There is the cost of investigating crimes, most of which is wasted, court and other fees. Then there is the human cost. A quite petty crime involving little or no material gain for the perpetrator, eg a house burglary where the burglar is disturbed, can lead to an enormous expenditure of time and resources. If combatting recidivism in this way helps reduce the incidence of such offences, surely it is money well spent? Moreover, the

idea is not entirely original. In his autobiography, the former Police Commissioner Sir Robert Mark suggested, only half jokingly, that certain offenders should be sent into exile. Nothing so drastic is suggested here, but the idea of segregating those who do not, will not, cannot fit in with society has much to offer both groups. This especially in a world where the untrained, unskilled and criminally promiscuous are becoming increasingly redundant.

Surely it is time that a radical new approach was adopted to the problem of recidivism? And surely the government would at least find the funding for a pilot scheme, perhaps in one of our smaller cities or large provincial towns?

Any attempt to judge such a scheme in purely financial or moral terms is to miss the point. The criminal element are (generally) a rag bag bunch of useless individuals: useless both to their fellow men and to themselves. Their behaviour is parasitic, but rather than being a menace to society they are a nuisance. They are not the rabid dog that savages a small child to death; rather they are the swarm of insects which bites and stings the sun bather, causing him, not real suffering, but damned inconvenience and spoils his fun. They are people too whose aspirations far outweigh their abilities, and they are forever seeking a short cut to leisure at someone else's expense. By removing two of the root causes of their anti-social behaviour: bad or no accommodation, and the poverty trap, which often they see as a conspiracy against them to grind them down and keep them in their place, by removing these two evils it is possible to give a group of severely disadvantaged people an opportunity to lead socially acceptable lives and to reduce the incidence of their parasitic and self-destructive behaviour.

The real justification for such a scheme is not to be found in the dismal science of economics, but in the bright new science of ecology; in particular, the avoidance of waste. The destruction of our environment is a crime; the waste of human beings is a sin.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK: AN UNFORTUNATE POSTSCRIPT

I make no apologies for the somewhat rambling and unscientific layout of this book, nor for its shabby presentation. The latter is due solely to the limited resources available to me. In the unlikely event of a second edition, it could be printed professionally. But this brief essay has been only partly an attempt to inject some sanity into the perceptions of the main problems faced by recidivists, from a worm's eye view. The other part has been catharsis, and for that I must thank that great 'prison reformer' the Earl of Longford.

Early in 1988, after everything I touched seemed to turn to mediocrity, and after I had become depressed and almost suicidal, I wrote to Lord Longford and asked him in as restrained a manner as I could for his help. Knowing his reputation and his 'good work' with the criminal element I thought/hoped he would be willing to help me. I was sadly mistaken. He wrote back and, after some further communication, we arranged to meet at the House of Lords.

One of the first things he said to me on our meeting was: "I haven't got a lot of money." I did not like this because it is a lie, (the old goat is obviously loaded); and also because I had made it quite clear to him prior to our meeting that I was not asking him for financial assistance, nor would I accept any hand outs if he offered them. My exact words were: "I would rather steal than beg." After he had brushed aside the things I had brought to show him with a brief utterance of contempt, I attempted to tell him how I had had to venture into the black economy. He told me at once: "I don't want to know about that." Obviously he felt that if he listened to what I had to say he would become an accessory to some terrible secret. In fact, I am convinced now that not only did he not listen to a single word I said, but that he paid scant attention to my written words either. His main concern was to find me a 'job'. When I explained to him why this would be no solution to my predicament on account of the

poverty trap, he replied: "Wouldn't you be better off working? Meeting people....." blah, blah, blah..... I tried to explain to him, (to no avail) that my principal concern was to improve my economic position, not my spiritual well being. Eventually he suggested the best thing he could do to help me would be to refer me to an agency he had founded many years before. He telephoned then and there from the House of Lords, passed the phone to me and I was given an appointment. When I went along to this 'agency' I met a man who could offer me nothing better than menial jobs on subsistence pay. Those were not his exact words, but he didn't mince the actual ones he used. However, he was not unsympathetic, (unlike Lord Longford), and told me that I should do what I considered best. Some people, he explained, preferred to opt out, to live alternative lifestyles; this is what I was doing, so why not carry on with it? I thanked him and left.

When I wrote to Lord Longford and told him what had happened he suggested we meet again. I told him I couldn't afford the train fare, which was a full 7% of my weekly benefit, that I didn't want to waste anymore time, especially my own, and that I was quite capable of paving my own road to Hell. I stopped short of telling him to fornicate elsewhere; one does not address a lord so, especially after having asked him for help, but I made myself clear, and he got the message.

Sometime later I received a further letter from him which was more conciliatory than repentant. In it he said he was still anxious to help, and that I had his address and phone number if I needed him. To this I replied that I had written to him for help, but that all he had offered me was a slow, lingering death. I said further that I did not wish to hear from him again unless he had something positive to offer me. Needless to say I have not heard from him since.

To me it is patently obvious what are the true motives of Lord Longford. And his ilk. The fact that he has spent so many years campaigning for useless, or even worthless causes and has not done one iota of good indicates clearly that he is more concerned

with buying himself a piece of pie in sky for when he goes to meet his maker than in making the wretched of the Earth any less wretched. He did not, I am glad to say, purchase himself a gramme of salvation on my account, and I'm sure the great JC will have taken note of this. It is also noticeable that since his creature Myra Hyndley confessed to further murders, and another of her victims was dug up on Saddleworth Moor, his Lordship's public utterances have grown more muted and less frequent. Ian Brady has, of course, long since disowned him.

Perhaps I am being a little uncharitable. A correspondent of mine, a retired clergyman of some eminence, and a genuinely concerned individual, described his syndrome somewhat differently:

I feel sorry for people like Lord Longford who, born in privilege, tend to interfere or blunder when they try to help in a world which their privilege prevents them understanding.

And there you have it in a nutshell. It is not just Lord Longford, but the people who run the system who perpetuate the vicious circles of recidivism, poverty, resentment etc. by their failing to grasp that the people at the bottom, the very bottom, live lifestyles as far removed from their own as if they lived on Mars, and have no less of an alien mentality. Until they realise this and attempt to solve the problem from the bottom upwards, rather than try to keep the wretched people in their place by making decrees from the top, they will merely succeed, like his Lordship, in paving the road to Hell with good intentions.

FOOTNOTE TO PAGE FIFTEEN

There is a very strong case for giving everyone a guaranteed non-means tested income. Not just the criminal element, unemployed, low paid etc. but everyone. Unfortunately the why's and how's are beyond the scope of this book. Interested readers are referred to **THE MYTH OF UNEMPLOYMENT** by S Goddard, and to the pioneering works of C H Douglas, the father of Social Credit.

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